

English ... where do we go from here?

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ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES

Jespersen (1948) ascribes the tremendous variety of the English language to the freedom a writer was given in England to '... take his words where he chooses, whether from the ordinary stock of everyday words, from native dialects, from old authors, or from other languages, dead or living. The consequence has been that English dictionaries comprise a larger number of words than those of any other nation, and that they present a variegated picture of terms from the four quarters of the globe.' (Jespersen, 1948:15). The foreign words and phrases so abundantly present in English have immeasurably enriched the language. English not only easily incorporates foreign words but also assimilates syntactical elements from other languages. This feature of English is the very reason for its rapid evolvment into a world language¹. The English literatures of Canada, Australia, South Africa, the United States of America, New Zealand and other English-speaking countries have all succeeded in describing situations, backgrounds and personalities typical for their territories and often better than any other

1 Mencken, H.L. in Jespersen, 1984:234.

language could have done. In fact, English has become so integrated in certain countries that one describes the particular local brand of English as 'South African English usage', 'Australian English', 'American English', etc. In South Africa, for example, it would be quite normal to find words from Afrikaans incorporated in an English text, the reader turning a blind eye to these : 'If you'll wear your *nagmaal* jacket next time... I'll be glad to show you all over my farm where I'm not going to plant potatoes... That is, among the *haak-en-steek* thorns.' (Bosman, 1971).

This facility opens the way for many people of different languages to communicate with one another in English. For example, when Portuguese immigrants arrive in South Africa their command of English is generally slight. Initially, when they start learning the language, one comes across the phenomenon of English words being used within a Portuguese context. For instance, instead of speaking of a 'lavrador' (a farmer) the expression 'um *farmeiro*' is used; instead of 'um *talheiro*' a butcher becomes 'um *bucheiro*', and the insurer, instead of being referred to as 'um *agente de seguro*' becomes 'um *shorer*'. Also, as is to be expected, some misunderstandings arise. One greengrocer, in recounting his initial difficulties with the English language, mentioned that a customer asking for a 'ripish' paw-paw, was surprised when the greengrocer fished one out of the rubbish bin². Among the Portuguese-speaking soldiers of all races who came from Angola and Moçambique to South Africa, the English 'picked up' by them or taught to them was adapted to their own intonation, pronunciation and vocabulary. The same happened to the Dutch immigrants - particularly the older generation - who often adapted their spoken English to the Dutch phonetic pattern, often using an /s/ where they should use /th/ e.g. *sin* instead of *thin*. The Indians, many of whom have been in South Africa for generations, employ a particular type of English usage (SAIE) which is characterised by syntactical peculiarities such as the use of the second person plural pronoun *y'all* and even its genitive form *y'all's*, or the ordinary question order being retained in indirect questions : 'do you know

2 Related to me by Mrs von Reiche in 1988.

where's Krish?' (Mesthrie, 1988:6). These are not typically South African problems. Theo Cutten (1983) cites an example of a warning to motorists in Tokyo: 'When a passenger of the foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet at him with vigour.' And Arthur Goldman (1983) tells of a notice he found in Beirut (before the Civil war): 'All water used for cooking in this hotel has been passed by the manager personally.' The black peoples of our country have their own problems with English, particularly with invariable plural nouns which do not take an -s suffix, e.g. cattle, sugar. The Tswana will speak of *cattles* and *sugars* (Gamaroff, 1988:31).

English is being used to an increasing extent as a world language by many people in different countries (Jespersen, 1948:233). However, this feature of English that it can be used as a *lingua franca*, has its disadvantages. And this is particularly evident in South Africa owing to its close proximity to Afrikaans.

AFRIKAANS INFLUENCE

In South Africa the official language situation has changed considerably over the past six decades. Before 1925, the year Afrikaans became an official language in the Transvaal, English was the more important language in the Union of South Africa. In the early thirties the SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, a cultural body set up in 1909 by the Afrikaans-speaking South Africans to guard over Dutch and Afrikaans language and culture, through its terminology committees set off an avalanche of terminological activity. The first Afrikaans Bible appeared in 1933 but, prior to that, many technical and scientific glossaries were produced and disseminated. A 'Vaktaalraad' (Terminology Board) came into being and also a 'Krygstaalraad' (Military Terminology Board).

The first *Military Dictionary* (English-Afrikaans) appeared in 1941, followed by the more authoritative *Weermagswoordeboek* in 1954. But, whereas new Afrikaans terminology was being created continually, English in South Africa, and particularly military terminology, did not always keep pace with technological changes.

The American terminology already well known overseas, was slow to take root here, causing terminological difficulties when attempting to apply the British terminology to concepts such as 'heading' (course), and various ammunition specifications. Consequently, in the South African Defence Force, as perhaps in other organisations, American technical text had to be 'translated' into English.

With the unprecedented development of Afrikaans, the increase in the Afrikaans-speaking population, and the shortage of English-medium teachers in primary and secondary schools, the quality of English-medium communication soon showed signs of deterioration. Factors contributing to this trend were the more rigid study-orientated approach in Afrikaans secondary schools which began to cater more for the public service as opposed to the more liberal choice-orientated approach of English medium schools, perhaps more suitable for careers in the private sector. This situation was compounded by a substantial immigrant population communicating in Portuguese, Spanish, French, German and a number of other European and also some Asiatic languages.

THE SITUATION OF ENGLISH

The situation of English in South Africa has imperceptibly undergone a change. Since the public service is generally regarded as an Afrikaans-dominated bureaucracy, the English-medium school and university graduates generally move towards the private sector where they predominate in corporate executive posts or in the professions. Afrikaans-medium schools have become the sources of manpower for the public service and despite the policy of equal treatment of the official languages (a policy entrenched in the South African Constitution) English language proficiency has shown a decline. This fact prompted large language bureaux, such as the State Language Service and the SADF Language Service, to establish special English language sections. Actual statistics of the home languages of members of the public service are interesting. For example, in the SADF Permanent Force, Afrikaans-speaking military and civilian members constitute respectively 75,17% and

75,89% of the total strengths compared to 24,85% English-speaking Permanent Force members and 24,11% English-speaking civilians. The result is that English-speaking national servicemen, particularly at Army Corps schools such as those serving the Infantry, Artillery, Armour and Engineers, can expect to receive instruction from predominantly Afrikaans-speaking instructors and, in spite of the strictly applied policy of equal treatment of both official languages, as embodied in Sect 137 of the Defence Act (Act 44 of 1957), most oral instructions are given in Afrikaans.

It is interesting to note that, whereas the SA Army is largely Afrikaans-speaking, the converse is true in the SA Navy where English is more commonly used. The SA Air Force is strongly English language-orientated and the SA Medical Service is about 50-50 Afrikaans/English. Of course, in considering the Arms of the Service, one must also bear in mind their different 'cultures'. A 'culture' in this sense comprises all the usages, customs, attitudes and traditions that have developed in a particular service over the past decades. The SA Army grew out of the ZAR Artillerie Corps, combined with some infantry regiments and other English-speaking units. The culture then became a predominantly Afrikaans-Dutch one and most artillery terms derived from a union between the Dutch-Afrikaans and later English influences.

The SA Air Force, like the SA Navy, was initially predominantly English-medium. Some of the traditions of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are still alive in those two services to this day. Of course, culture is created by the people manning and commanding these services and I suspect that, added to the historical traditions carried over from the Boer War, the First World War and the Second World War, there are many American influences which can be traced back to the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts.

TROOPIE LANGUAGE

An interesting facet of English spoken in the SA Defence Force is 'troopie' language. More than 30 000 national servicemen are called up annually for military service and within the military

milieu Afrikaans and English speakers are in constant daily contact. This has led to the development of a particular type of 'in-speak' or sociolect, the so-called 'troopie' language. This is an informal process : youth is creative and will sometimes look at military customs and drills with a somewhat jaundiced eye. During their two-year stint in the Army the troops often regard their period of national service as a necessary evil, although most do seem to enjoy it as they adapt to the different ways of life and look back on their military service as one of the happiest periods in their lives. They live between tears and laughter, between fear of the sergeant-major and the excitement of a parachute jump early in the morning. They apply all their ingenuity and wit to situations they encounter and use their own language and slang to pass ironic comment on their sergeant majors, their corporals, regimental duties, and so 'troopie' language is born. Perhaps some of the phrases and lexical items that occur in 'troopie' talk would be regarded as unacceptable by language purists, but in many cases the expressions used impart a truly South African colour to the English spoken in the SADF. Dr Johnson, if he were alive today, would be amazed at the English spoken by the troops; Pope and Dryden would not be amused, but I believe that Shakespeare would enjoy it.

What follows should provide a brief impression of the language used, not by the officers, but by the troops themselves. New recruits are called 'roofies'; a 'roof' becomes a 'blougat' when he is about halfway through his period of service and, when he has nearly finished his service, he has 'min dae' and is elevated to the exalted ranks of the 'ou manne'. Troops with exceptionally dirty habits are censured by their 'gabbas' and are called 'vuilgatte' while a particularly ugly specimen is called a 'skrik'. The steel locker is called a 'kas', the metal trunk is a 'trommel', the dixie becomes a 'varkpan' and eating utensils 'grazing spanners'. Stepping-out dress is called 'mooi-moois' and the barracks are affectionately known as 'varkhokke'. Entire sentences are often given with Afrikaans words : In the mornings they must 'aantree' (form up) and when they 'klaar uit' (clear out) they have 'lang hare' and are back in 'civvy' straat'. Their helmets are 'staaldakke' and plas-

tic inner helmets 'mosdoppies'. Should they fail to pass the inspection by the 'mammajoer' (sergeant-major) the latter will give the troops 'storings' (troubles) but if everything is in order they will feel 'bakgat' (fine).

CONCERN

I do not think that 'troopie' language should give rise to concern about the standard of the English language in South Africa. After all, service slang is found in other English-speaking countries as well and there are even dictionaries of service and other slang published to describe this type of inspeak³.

The problem facing the English language in South Africa is that the number of English mother tongue speakers is declining and that bilingual interference factors often go unchecked. South African English usage as recorded in dictionaries such as those by Jean Branford⁴ is interesting and colourful but when it gives rise to poor English usage owing to negligence and ignorance, it does become a real problem. Examples of lexical interference such as 'bioscope' (theatre); 'flaghoisting' (flagraising) or syntactic interference such as 'I'll throw you with a stone' (met 'n klip), 'I can't get it over my heart' (oor my hart kry), 'how late is it?' (hoe laat is dit?), 'I'll see you by the barracks' (by die barak) abound, as do cases of orthographical interference : *surplusses* instead of *surpluses*, *souvereignty* instead of *sovereignty*, *maneuvers* instead of *manoeuvres*. Although the actual examples used are overt signs of second language interference, the real causes are usually more hidden : an uninvolved, disinterested attitude towards the language or perhaps, a lack of incentives to improve proficiency in English.

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- 3 Stone, Robert, 1975. *Dog Soldiers*. Secker & Warburg : New York.
 O'Brien, Tim. 1973. *If I die in a Combat Zone*. Calder & Boyars : New York.
 Wentworth, Harold. 1975. *Dictionary of American Slang*. 2nd ed. Thomas Crowell : New York.
- 4 Branford, Jean. 1980. *A Dictionary of South African English*. OUP : Cape Town.

The SA Defence Force is deeply concerned about the proficiency of its members in both official languages. In the military context efficient communication is vital. For, besides marching on their stomachs (as Napoleon put it), soldiers move to commands, orders, instructions and directives. The overall policies and strategy of the country are translated into military strategies at general officer level, leading eventually to tactical principles embodied in directives to field commanders and supported by instructions at every level. All along the way there are 'botherance factors' : misconstrued policies due to inappropriate terms or woolly sentence constructions. In fact, an entire military campaign could be jeopardized by poor language proficiency.

English proficiency is at present receiving specific attention in the SA Defence Force. Language clinics (often with help from the English-speaking public) are being established at territorial command level in conjunction with local expert civilian language instructors; special English enrichment courses are being offered and, in addition to several articles dealing with English language usage appearing in many publications, a manual *English Language Usage in the SADF* will soon be published. Moreover, the focus will fall on the quality of English during staff writing and speech-making competitions planned in the SADF. The language policy of alternating the official languages each month in all official communications and correspondence, as well as during training, will be applied with even greater strictness, but also with the necessary empathy.

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